

ADDRESS**7 November 2021****All Saints' Day**

Isaiah 25.6-9	Rejoicing in the Lord
Psalms 24	Those who seek him
Revelation 21.1-6a	New heaven and new earth
John 11. 32-44	The raising of Lazarus

*Open our minds, O Lord, to hear
and to understand your Word, and
open our hearts to do your will.
We ask in Jesus' name. AMEN.*

The hymn we heard earlier is not in our hymnbook, but it is sung in many churches on All Saints' Day, and also on dedication festivals, with an extra verse about living stones.

The hymn was written in 1894 by the Revd William Draper, the vicar of the ancient abbey church in Shrewsbury, north-west of London, for the service to mark its reopening after a long restoration.

Draper later became the Master of the Temple in London and the haunting tune, St Catherine's Court, was composed in 1927 by one of Draper's parishioners: Richard Strutt, who was a City banker and stockbroker.

The Temple church is one of the most remarkable churches in London. The round section is the original church of the Knights Templar, consecrated in the year 1185 by the Patriarch of Jerusalem. The chancel on the right was added about 35 years later.

The church contains centuries-old effigies of some famous knights templar – they featured in a dramatic scene in the movie *The Da Vinci Code*.

Seven key phrases from William Draper's hymn can help us take in the significance of All Saint's Day. The words are in *Connections*.

1 [v1] *In our day of thanksgiving . . . All Saints' Day is a day of thanksgiving for all those who have lived in God's love and rejoiced in God's grace, people like us, but especially for those who have been martyred for their witness -- in the words of the letter to the Hebrews, *those who died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they had seen them and embraced them.* (Heb. 11.13)*

This is *the reward* for all those who obey the will of God in this life – they catch a glimpse of the life to come -- in serving God, in answered prayer and in the life of the community of the faithful.

Why were we all so glad to be back to church three weeks ago? Because we are seen as a community in which everyone can find a home. That's part of the message we should be sharing with our neighbours, our workmates and our friends.. .

2 [v1] *The shadow of death* . . . Today's gospel is John's graphic account of the raising of Lazarus, who is acclaimed as a saint in many parts of the church worldwide. The miracle is the last of the seven signs of Jesus' divinity which John's gospel records.

Jesus gave Lazarus a second chance at life, and later traditions say he made the most of it – one account says he became an evangelist in Cyprus, and the first bishop of Larnaca. The main Orthodox church in Larnaca is dedicated to Saint Lazarus.

Other traditions say that Lazarus brought the gospel to the south of France, becoming the first bishop of Marseilles. He was imprisoned and executed in an underground prison and his body taken to the town of Autun, 500 km to the north, and buried there. Autun cathedral is also dedicated to Saint Lazarus.

The story of Lazarus has become a signature symbol of being given another chance, after a serious illness, or an encounter with the law, or losing your job, or your partner. John Howard, for example, called his autobiography *Lazarus Rising*. In the strength of the risen Christ, many, many people have been unbound from their past to start life again.

3 [v1] *Now we rejoice* . . . Today we read Isaiah's apocalyptic prophecy of the coming feast to celebrate our liberation, the end of darkness and death, the feast of all the saints.

In Isaiah's imagery, Mount Zion, the mountain of the Lord, is where God dwells as king, where he reveals himself to his people, the place where his saints will gather to rejoice in his salvation.

The passage is a reminder that we stand on the shoulders of the saints before us. They are our eternal example. That's why we list some of the great saints in the church calendar in *Connections* each week, as well as members of our families who have passed over into eternal life. Our understanding of the Scriptures does not allow us to pray for them or to pray to them, but we can honour them and ask God to help us emulate their faith.

4 [v2] *they were gathered to heaven . . .* after his second life, Lazarus died again, in Palestine, in Cyprus, in France, somewhere. . . Everyone dies. What is important is emulating the saints before we die.

We are often told that most young people don't think about getting old, or retirement or death, so they are less likely to take out health insurance or boost their superannuation. They need to take note of Doc Martin, of his answer to the child who asked him tearfully, *Am I going to die? Yes, you are, but not today*, he said.

We can all be more positive about death, because, in death we are gathered with the saints, and with God. One of Charles Wesley's great funeral hymns has it right:

Rejoice for a brother deceased

Our loss is his infinite gain . . .

5 [v2] *God's love . . .* Lazarus's rising reveals the unique nature of Jesus as both true God and true man. Why did Jesus weep over Lazarus's death? The Gospel says, because he loved him, man to man. Why did he give Lazarus a second earthly life? Because he had divine power.

The great sign of today's reading is that, through Jesus' sacrificial death, he gives us all a second chance, of a new life, with his Father in heaven. The Lord's prayer becomes our reality. That's more good news we should be sharing with our neighbours and friends, and with the people of this area, in every way we can. In some parts of the early church, Christians who had offered sacrifices to the emperor as a god but later repented were offered a new-life ceremony. They came to the church in death shrouds. The doors were shut, but after they publicly repented of their sins and asked to be readmitted to fellowship, the doors were opened and they were re clothed in new white robes. Like Lazarus, they once were dead and were now alive again.

6 [v4] *They believed in the light . . .* there's an old story about the child who asked her minister *What is a saint?* The minister pointed to the stained-glass window and said, *Saints are people who let the light of God shine in.*

All of us have someone to thank for revealing God to us. I thank the two misses Hurst, who led my junior Sunday School. They refused several offers of marriage so that they could be completely dedicated to God and his children. There is no stained

glass window to honour them, but hundreds of men and women committed their lives to God through their ministry.

Probably every one of you can tell of someone who revealed the light of God to you – your parents, or some godly relative, or someone in your church. The saints not only believe in the light of God, the light of faith, they model the love of God to others. All of us should aspire to doing that.

7 [v4] *Where the clouds of earth's sorrows is lifted at last . . .* our epistle reading begins the sublime account of the new creation at the end of earthly time – the old earth destroyed, the garden replaced with the city of the saints, the new Jerusalem, the church, and the sea of all evils, including what St Paul called the last enemy, death, is no more.

All the saints who have thirsted for God now enjoy the fullness of the water of life.

All the blessings of this life, for which we thank God, are nothing compared with those of the life to come.

So, what is a saint?

We often use the word lightly; we often use the word for people who go out of their way to help others. That is not enough to be a true saint.

The Old Testament has four different words which are generally translated as 'saint' – they simply mean 'kind' or 'pious' or 'set apart'. Today's psalm uses another term, *those who ascend the hill of the Lord, Mount Zion.*

*Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.*

Of course, saints are like this, but they are like this because of their faith. They are more than kind or generous – the New Testament reveals that saints are those who have given their earthly lives to Jesus and are now assured of joining Lazarus and St Mark and millions of other saints in eternal life, in the company of the divine Trinity. In Australia they may become victims of the cancel culture, but in many parts of the world, in the Middle East and China, and in Egypt and other parts of Africa, saints are being persecuted for their loyalty to God, their churches destroyed and their leaders killed, but they hold firm to their faith.

SLIDE OFF

We can admire the saints, and give thanks for their witness, and mourn their deaths, and honour their memory, but we must do more – we must also try to emulate them, and follow in their footsteps, overcoming challenges to our faith in God's strength, and sharing his good news. Then we can look forward to joining them in their eternal home, *'where the clouds of earth's sorrows are lifted at last'*.

Lord, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, help us also to lay aside every weight, every one of the sins which cling to us so closely, and strengthen us to run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

For *Connections*

The Feast of All Saints

(November 1)

SERMON OUTLINE

The address is based on the hymn, sung by the choir:

In our day of thanksgiving one psalm let us offer
for the saints who before us have found the reward;
when the shadow of death fell upon them, we sorrowed,
but now we rejoice that they rest in the Lord.

In the morning of life, and at noon, and at evening,
they were gathered to heav'n from our worship below;
but not till God's love, at the font and on the altar,
had clothed them with grace for the way they should go.

Sing praise, then, and thanks that God's love here has found them
whose journey is ended, whose perils are past;
they believed in the light; and its glory is round them,
where the clouds of earth's sorrows are lifted at last.

William Draper 1855 – 1933

Tune *St Catherine's Court* -- Richard Strutt 1848-1927